

Towards the right to our vulnerable humanness, the hidden struggle to anarcha-feminism in the XXI century

Anti-ableism as anarcha-feministic strategy

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As a psychopedagogue and as a white European slightly visually impaired woman, I have often thought how much of our lives are determined by ableism. Its discriminatory force might be subtle, but the truth is that several Western fields, such as health or paid labour, are strongly based on the idea of a masculine health norm as an ideal towards which we should strive. Moreover, many of our organizational systems are developed around the idea of a permanent state of good health where disease and disability are seen as weaknesses that prevent us from being fully worthy members of society.

The masculine norm has not only a patriarchal background, but also an undeniable capitalistic cause that anarchy-feminism should openly fight to smash. In a very eloquent tweet written by the user named Conor Arpweil on February 16th 2018, went straight to the essence of ableism:

“Unlearning ableism requires a fundamentally anti-capitalist change in perspective. Specifically, it necessitates that you believe in the inherent worth of human beings, regardless of someone’s social position or productive potential”.

The whole issue here is how anarchy-feminism can cooperate for example with disabled and ecological groups. The goal of this cooperation should be to create solidarity networks based on mutual aid in order to live a good life beyond the masculine norm of health and without engaging in the work force just to prove our self-worth.

In this essay I will present some of the social arenas in which we must work in order to unlearn ableism and to create a safe, free and open society where human health is based on diversity and solidarity. First, I will contextualize the meaning of the word disability, then I will discuss how to build inclusive public spaces in order to guarantee freedom and social participation for all. Later I will discuss the necessity of fighting ableism through the decolonization of the school system and by changing the nature of participation in paid labour.

Disability is just a word

This is the title of a Norwegian book written by Lars Grue that I liked especially because of its cultural and historical analysis of the view on disability. Disability is a complex phenomenon that includes both different kinds of body function- including physical, cognitive and psychological functions- as well as different kinds of limitations caused by society. In Karen Whalley Hammell’s book “Perspectives on Disability and Rehabilitation” (2006) is thoroughly discussed in chapter 3 how disability and the deviance from the norm is yet another stereotype socially constructed classification to oppress that excludes and marginalizes people.

The contemporary conception of disability has grown hand in hand with the possibilities of every person to engage in the paid workforce just like any other social classificatory practice we use. What makes ableism so catastrophic is not only its rhetoric and how it renders people with disabilities invisible in the anti-capitalistic struggle, but also how fascistic ideologies have, throughout history, fought against human biodiversity with eugenics that saw this ideology as a means of ameliorating poverty within the capitalist system. People with disabilities have been seen in a hierarchical scale of life as unworthy and imperfect versions of a human being.

In this Eurocentric context in addition to fascistic traditions, Christian and Catholic religions have played a decisive role supporting eugenics and, at the same time, pushing women towards a life of sacrifice and almost holiness if they have a child with a disability. The explanation is that

either God sent a child with disabilities as a punishment for the mother's sins or as a blessing to make her appreciate her subordinate role in society.

The truth is that depending on the culture and the religious background, people with disabilities have been seen either as a blessing or as a burden, and it is absolutely clear that in capitalist society most people with disabilities - independently of what other abilities, activities or interests they have as human beings - risk living in isolation and shame if their health doesn't allow them to work outside the home..

Our invisibility as people becomes reinforced by the invisibility of our actions on an everyday basis. Many people face depression, low self-esteem and low self-worth because they have internalized the commodifying message that the work system sells to us: if you can't work, you are unworthy of a good life and cannot be a visible person in society. The problem is, of course, that capitalism measures human worth just by our productivity, and anarcho-feminists should seek to shut the productivity-based system down because of its oppressive nature towards all of us. Its psychosocial weapons for control and oppression against us are stigma, alienation and guilt but these are often treated as individual problems rather than consequences of an oppressive system.

Women know very well that even temporary health issues affect how we are attacked by capitalists. For example, in every country in the world the discussion about menstruation and work participation figures regularly in public debate. Since the masculine norm does not count menstruation as a natural event that can cause abdominal pain, headaches and, generally speaking, a changed general health condition for part of the population, it is seen as an excuse for not going to work. The discussion always revolves around how some people think it is unjust that women should have paid leave during menstruation if they need to stay home. This is the most basic and clearest example of how a variation from the capitalistic masculine health norm is seen as unworthy and unnatural.

Then we have the issues of pregnancy, childcare tasks and burn out syndromes that many women suffer because of their responsibilities for themselves, as workers and for others. These issues are the cause of systematic abuse against women when, from a neoliberal discourse, they are turned into sickness because most men do not have the same daily experiences. The personal has always been political.

The last example includes people with physical, cognitive or psychological difficulties that prevent them from participating in the work force. The problem lays clearly with the capitalist-based system that expects full participation in instrumentalized jobs in the paid workforce, while ignoring the importance of our own health and of other unpaid care tasks that are needed in society. Unfortunately, in their insatiable hunger for economical growth, politicians, bureaucrats and lawmakers are responsible for direct attacks towards individuals with varied health, blaming them for not wanting to help society.

Accepting diversity as the reference to our humanness

It seems obvious that there is no such thing as a norm just as no individual has permanent good health through our entire life span. This is why we have to fight for our rights for diversity without striving towards a fictitious and non-existent ideal of human life.

In addition to this, many people still think that people with disabilities live in constant self-pity because they want to become “normal” or disability-free. This is an utterly authoritarian thought, since it implies that there is an inherent and vertical hierarchy in health, that being constantly healthy puts you at the top of this hierarchy, while at the bottom we find people with chronic diseases and/or disabilities. This ableist thought builds upon the idea that everybody with a disease or a disability is willing to strive towards the masculine norm of healthy person. That is, of course, far away from the truth, and many people with disabilities live happily as they are and are actually tired of being patronized or seen as examples of courage by able people. People have the freedom to feel good in their bodies regardless of diagnosis, symptoms, ableist expectations or the love for inspiration porn we are constantly exposed to.

When it comes to seeing freedom from a physical and architectonical view, we must face the fact that many public spaces are not built for human diversity while other spaces such as internet might be easier to access. In order to achieve real freedom, solidarity and cooperation and create a genuine alternative to capitalism, we need to fight for accessible and safe physical spaces. We also need to fight for personal assistance and access to aid resources that allow people to participate fully in their communities.

The lack of accessibility in the political and welfare system is clear. In many countries, there are no welfare measures to guarantee personal freedom and social participation; in other cases, these measures are dependent on the state. One can argue that it is better to have welfare measures than not having them at all but, based on my own experience, state-based welfare measures are very fragile. On the one hand, the availability of these measures depends on political goodwill and, on the other hand, access to these aid resources is usually hidden behind a huge bureaucratic wall with gatekeepers in bullshit jobs deciding who gets help according to the state budget. Once again, capitalism and state control limit people’s chance to live the life they want, dramatically reducing their chances of participation in society.

In this case, social movements should rally to find collective solutions to assure aid resources and welfare measures to those who need them. My first thought is that we can take advantage of the technological advances found in aid resources to create a user network that shares existing resources and that is managed and organized collectively by those who use these resources. In order to guarantee a free life and full access to participate in society, it is vital that aid resources and assistance are directly shared and managed by those who actually need them. This requires a new economic organization based on communal cooperation. In any case, organizations and anarchist groups can debate local solutions in order to build grassroots- alternatives . To achieve freedom of movement we must work for freedom of function diversity opening for several ways of activism.

Decolonizing the masculine norm of health to embrace human diversity

The Western ideal of a masculine health norm must be unlearned and replaced. In order to do so, embracing diversity must have a decolonizing perspective that replaces the idea of the normal. This unlearning process must operate both individually and collectively. Individually we must recognizing our vulnerable humanness; collectively we must change the educational

system into a children-teacher arena in which freedom, critical thinking, human diversity and social cooperation become the key learning frames.

The reason behind the need of decolonizing the idea of the normal is that in many cultures, the understanding of human nature is not based on either the healthy-sick duality or the masculine norm. Unfortunately, European capitalistic colonialism spread a limited human view of disability and connected it strongly to the ability to be productive and economically independent - this is the notion we must replace. In practice, this means getting rid of the Eurocentric view about humans and nature and opening up other cultural understandings of human nature, especially those based in diversity as the source of life and cooperation as an ethical social base.

Decolonizing the ableist view of human nature includes eradicating the masculine norm of health and substituting it with human diversity as the common ground. Living beings are vulnerable and only through mutual aid can we live good lives independently of whatever health moment we are in.

A critical place to decolonize through respect for diversity is in the school system. The main obstacle in the school system is multiple, because of the way in which the Western school system is biased, whitewashed and based on the exaggerated focus on the instrumentalization of skills. In the globalized educational system based on Western school system there is a narrow understanding of what is the goal of learning. That defines the methods, contents and skills that the state decides children should learn. Right now the goal for learning is not free individual development but to create obedient workers. This is a disgusting issue in itself, but the hidden problem is that many children with disabilities face discrimination and isolation because the range of important skills is too instrumental and narrow. They are excluded in the classroom, and later they are excluded in society.

The mechanism is clear: the school system operates with an average norm that leaves all the children under this average in high risk of being marginalized because they do not qualify to be future productive members of society.

Good health is a right, not a privilege. Health injustice is class war

Independently of our body's function or health level, we can agree that everybody deserves to have a good quality of life. Under the existing economic system, health is seen as a privilege limited to the wealthy class. Just like any other feature in our lives, health has become a commodity that only rich people can afford.

It is also often connected to our educational levels, which go hand in hand with social class and economic status. We can agree that in most countries health is a product you can buy, which makes it an equality source well misused by governments to control the population. If you are sick or disabled without any possibility of getting help, it is less possible that you actually organize and rebel.

In temporary or chronically variated health conditions, we need to cut the connection between the health system and economic benefits. While we organize for a classless society, we must fight for good health care services for everybody. Many grassroots movements already organize to avoid the dismantling of health care systems, but still conservatives and liberals support privatization of health services to create yet another source of enrichment for the few, while the poor lose their rights. There is a long chain of individual private benefits that connects insurance

companies, politicians and international pharmaceutical enterprises and these connections must be replaced by open public and people-owned systems.

The privatization of health services at the same time as part of the population is being stigmatized for their need for healthcare is beyond inhuman. We cannot pretend that social stigmatization of our human vulnerability is not an effective tool for exploitation. Many people are being stigmatized for being too far from the ideal of health normality and, at the same time, they are being held accountable for their lack of economic resources in order to get a better life. This is a form of class war against the poor: individuals with “bad” health are robbed of their rights to a good quality of life.

The privatization of health services is theft and class war, just as it is when governments allow private companies to profit from our human vulnerability. Our health is commodified and we urgently need to disrupt the connection between private health-related companies, the state and the health system. The health system should be organized and managed publicly by health workers and the rest of the population, though in this case the structure should be revised thoroughly to ensure all the medical specialties are well distributed according to the population’s needs.

As anarcha-feminists we should also focus our fight from an intersectional gender perspective. Maternity, children’s health and sexual health issues are constantly being deprioritized in today’s health care system according to the funding priorities of state politicians. We know for a fact that medical research is very much focused on supporting results that can generate benefits for pharmaceutical and other medical companies, and that research around the health of women and the genderqueer is lacking. This gender-biased reality in medicine makes many of us disadvantaged and facing worse health care services with increasing exposure to authoritarianism and force in different medical services. Women and genderqueer health provision is, consequently, of reduced quality and is systemically discriminatory, something that has direct consequences for how we experience our health and quality of life.

Dismantle the capitalist workforce

The capitalist workforce is yet another form of oppression because of both its compulsory and inherently discriminatory nature.

Anarcha-feminist direct action must attack the core of ableism, that is, the economic and patriarchal background of this discrimination. Initially I quoted a tweet explaining how the connection between paid work and self-worth is established in capitalist societies. That is why it is mandatory for anarcha-feminists to make paid labour a choice and not an obligation in order to break this association that affects our self-worth and self-esteem.

It has been proven that in this highly technological age the principle of economic growth through labour is being challenged by robots and other technological solutions. These solutions might challenge the routines of paid labour, leaving many people outside the job market. But the major turning point is to abolish the idea of compulsory paid work as a prerequisite for covering our daily needs. By shifting the structures of paid work we can create a system that works according to our human nature without economic or material dependence in order to cover our basic needs.

Many economists and politicians advocate the possibilities of this change through reformist solutions because of the potential for giving people the time to raise their awareness and offering

new opportunities to organize if they are not busy working to survive. That is why solutions such as the universal basic income or the 6-hour working day are raised as realistic solutions nowadays. They sound promising because of their damage control nature, although we cannot accept them because they lack the goal of changing the system. Some might think though that these proposals of superficial change to the workforce is a first step to liberation. But then again, without a clear collective anticapitalistic goal these measures will simply maintain the current inequality and discrimination because they continue to chain our worth to our productivity.

Reformist proposals can just be accepted as temporary solutions always having in mind that the main goal is to dismantle the paid work force. As social beings we seek activity and contact with others, and these needs can be covered by self-organized local communities where categorization, oppression and exploitation is not allowed. Mutual aid should be the safety network that guarantees that every person can cover their basic needs and, at the same time, develop their potential as human beings with dignity in a social context.

All the structural connections behind ableism that have been presented in this essay have been explained with a double aim - to promote collective and individual change. Many of us have internalized a contempt for the poor and disabled. At the same time, we are unaware that in an oppressive and unjust system in which there is no care-based network to take care of ourselves in our most sensitive moments. Our human vulnerability means that any of us can potentially experience difficulty and discrimination if our health suddenly changes. Unlearning ableism at an individual level, combined with the establishment of solid mutual aid structures as alternatives to state-owned health care and welfare systems, are the biggest steps we can take to live with dignity in our vulnerable human nature.

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